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ABSTRACT

Communication among teaching assistants can be as complicated as communication among full time faculty members, so that power relationships influence the rhetoric they use when they talk about being students, teachers, and professionals. Analysis of the political dimensions of teaching assistant interaction in the English department at the Unversity of Dayton (Ohio) demonstrates how conversation plays a role in their development. Information comes from personal experience as well as from a questionnaire distributed to the teaching assistants in that department. The communication network that evolves among teaching assistants serves two main purposes: support and development. A division exists between new and experienced teaching assistants. Typically, inexperienced teaching assistants are more reluctant to discuss departmental policy and are less inclined to view faculty as peers. Discussion of personal matters is minimal, and office talk generally focusses on professional matters. Professional obligations, such as conference presentations and publications, are routinely discussed and emphasized as important facets of higher education. Finally, the power relationship between first and second year teaching assistants is an unequal one favoring the more experienced. (HB)

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The Rhetoric And Politics of Teaching Assistants

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The Rhetoric And Politics of Teaching Assistants

Communication among teaching assistants can be as complicated as communication among full time faculty members. Teaching assistants generally spend a great deal of time with each other professionally, socially, and academically developing a complex communication system that affects how they talk to each other. My presentation will examine how the power relationships among TAs influence the rhetoric used when they talk about being students, teachers and professionals. What kind of communication network is established and how can this help or hinder the professional and intellectual development of tomorrow's teachers? Through analysis of how the political dimensions of TA interaction influence the rhetoric of teaching assistants in the English department at the University of Dayton, I'll try to characterize the roles conversations play in TA development.

My information comes from two sources: my own experience as a TA and a questionnaire I distributed to the other TAs in the English Department at Dayton. My own perceptions and experience differ in some respects from the perceptions represented on the questionnaires perhaps because some feel the issue of "politics" is best left unaddressed. I understand that TA political interaction depends a great deal on the particular personalities involved. However, I feel that these observations hold important implications for other graduate schools.

It appears as though the communication network that evolves among TAs serves two main purposes: support and development. When I began my assistantship I was one of three new TAs joining

a group of five experienced TAs. It soon became apparent that the politics governing the interactions among these TAs was very complicated. There was an immediate division between the incoming TAs, which include all of the TAs of this panel, and our more experienced peers. This division seems to be evident this year, as well. Incoming TAs appear to be more comfortable among themselves, finding more comfort and support within their own group. As one first year TA put it, " . . . my fellow first year TAs are more 'in the same boat.' We came in at the same time and shared the significant experience of being 'brand new' at the game. That's ground for more personal 'bonding.'" I know I was reluctant to elicit advice about teaching from an experienced TA for fear of seeming naive. This reluctance was fueled by an "arrogance of experience" that I sensed from a number of my more experienced peers. An experienced TA who began the program when I did remembers: "Last year, I listened trying to gain knowledge to help me teach. I watched more than talked. The first year TA (or maybe me personally) has little confidence. The second year TAs seemed so at ease and knowledgeable." The experience of teaching the first year is trying --a time when so much is learned within such a short period that often TAs experience extreme frustration. It has been my experience that this type of frustration is best vented with and understood by those of the same level of experience. Some may believe that turning to a peer TA for help or advice would be the most natural and easiest means of attaining support, but this is not always the case. Nothing is worse than revealing your anxiety about walking into

the classroom for the first time and having someone with more experience smile patronizingly and say "Don't worry you'll do fine." I think it is important for TAs of all levels of experience to understand this and not be personally offended if newer TAs do not interact as closely with them as they do with their less experienced peers. TAs with more experience feel flattered when new TAs come to them for advice. However, a sense of competition has the potential to develop among the experienced TAs who vie for the attention of their less experienced peers. The "bonding" experience among new TAs should be honored as it can be fruitful and is often a means of survival.

These conversations TAs have among themselves not only provide support but they also foster intellectual and professional development. When I was a first year TA I know I was entirely too serious at the office, less apt to relax and be myself because I was too busy trying to act like a teacher. I felt pressure from the faculty to constantly "wear my teacher hat" simply because they only seemed interested in what I did in the classroom. Rarely did members of the faculty express interest in me as a person. As for my more experienced peers, I also felt the pressure to be the intellectual, after all I was a GRADUATE student. The aspect of change that I most remember was the vocabulary I used. I always wanted to sound "intellectual" even though I was unsure if I really was. I sense that the same is true among some of the TAs this year.

Conversations TAs have when talking about being members of the department or about department policy reinforce the divisions between first and second year teaching assistants. During

my first year as a teaching assistant, I was reluctant to talk about being a member of the department and about department policies. This reluctance was due partly to the ill-defined position I felt I held. I did not see the members of the faculty as my peers. They were still my superiors in every way. I did not feel that I had a right to question the department policy developed by the faculty. The same seems true of the new TAs this year. The second year TAs are much more likely to complain about policies they do not agree with or voice opinions about the way the administration operates. Very rarely do I hear first year teaching assistants talking about department policy or their role within the department, itself. One TA explained his reluctance to discuss department policy in an interesting way: " . . . since all the second year TAs are also UD undergrad alumni, I am not likely to talk about things that bother me about the program. I understand the amount of loyalty that one can have to their school (I have quite a bit for mine) so I'm careful not to 'shoot my mouth off.'" I find this ironic in light of the transition that I 've gone through in the past year. This year I am much more likely to discuss department policy with the other TAs. I cannot say this is because I feel my position is anymore defined than it was last year, but I can say that I understand the dynamics of the department a little better than I did before.

Although many TAs are eager to discuss academic and political issues with their peers, discussion of personal matters may be a different case. I know I was reluctant to disclose personal information to those with second year TAs for fear that informa-

tion could reach people I had not intended it to reach. A fellow TA revealed a similar viewpoint: "I've learned [to] be especially careful about what I say to other TAs. It gets around. TAs are very gossipy. I include myself." At the office, the first year TAs are more inclined to ask me questions about a specific lesson or see if I have any productive handouts that they could use rather than sit down with me and discuss personal matters The "non-teaching talk" typically consists of the usual banalities. However, the communication system that evolves in just one year can become very complicated. The more experienced TAs will have shared experiences with each other that the newer TAs will not be a part of. New TAs have yet to go through this "getting to know" stage that is so influential in the development of the communication system. This difference adds to the division between the two groups. The experienced TAs will be reluctant to share the already existing political dynamics among themselves with the new TAs because they often feel that these new peers should develop opinions of and communication networks between other TAs on their own without influence.

When I addressed the issue of how conversations might facilitate professional development, few of the new TAs could pinpoint any specific conversations that have contributed to their growth. My experience suggests that professional development is more a part of the politics than the rhetoric of the department. It became a matter of faculty expectations. Expectations were often communicated by the faculty in the form of indirect complaints of unprofessional vocabulary or displeased stares when they pass by TA offices. The TAs came to know that all of this

and more was a part of the professional development. After visiting a number of the classrooms of my more experienced peers, I gained a better understanding of what is meant by a professional "aire" in the classroom. By watching my inexperienced peers march off to Boston for CCCC's and to Columbus, Ohio, for CEAO I soon learned that giving papers was also a part of my professional development. As a first year TA, I often talked with my second year TA "mentor" about maybe presenting a paper myself at a conference. She was the teaching assistant with the most experience presenting papers and publishing articles and was also the most encouraging to me. The other TAs seemed more reluctant to discuss this subject perhaps because they were less fortunate in their publishing experience. It was only after these more experienced peers graduated and returned after their first semester in their doctoral programs, that I learned how truly vital this experience is to both professional development and future education. My "mentor" truly believed that it was her experience presenting papers at three conferences that decided her acceptance into the program she is now pursuing.

I've found that the power relationship between first and second year teaching assistants is an unequal one. Where experienced TAs are low on the totem pole in the department, new TAs are even lower on the totem pole. How new TAs react even to their peers is influenced by the politics of the situation. Even though experienced peers do not hold the power of "the grade," they do possess power in a variety of other ways that are sometimes equally important. For example, when I began the program

at UD, it was very important to me to be liked and admired by my more experienced peers. It was important to me that they felt I was both smart (doing well in graduate school) and a good teacher (excelling in the classroom). Part of my self worth and self identity was invested in what these people thought of me. I am positive that this affected the types of conversations that I had with them. When I got an "A" in a difficult class, I was more apt to tell my more experienced peers than I was to reveal that one of my teaching days "bombed." A great deal can be learned from a close observation and an honest assessment of the power relationships that develop among TAs.

The rhetoric and politics that exist among TAs can be a complicated as it is among faculty members. The complex communication system that develops among a group of people who spend so much time together serves to educate in a variety of ways. The political aspects of these relationships has a real effect on what TAs say and how they say it, and why certain conversations take place among particular TAs and not among others.